Reading/Writing the AAP: The challenge of producing contemporary art history

REUBEN RAMAS CAÑETE

"Critics" are insecure and ever wary of the reflexive effects of their own actions. They focus on the play of artistic means, attending especially to rhetoric and figuration. They are the creators of metadiscourses, commentaries on modes of commentary. When they criticize others yet exempt their own reasoning, they become too convinced of the truth of their own expression to be "critics": they become, to a certain extent, "artists."

—Richard Shiff

The process of writing histories of art has been a hermeneutic challenge since the notion of inclusivity and objectivity have been questioned by its leading practitioners for the most part of the last thirty years. This author's attempt at writing art history has been a process of renegotiating these issues about the act of writing and reading of art history as a problematic field, as it is assumed to be composed of agents whose interests are best served through the strategies of presencing and absencing of texts.

"A Contemporary History of the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) from 1988-1998: Issues, Perspectives and Strategies of Research and Writing about Contemporary Art History in the Philippines" is a study of the processes by which the author is tasked to produce a history on the Art Association of the Philippines (henceforth to be called AAP) during the years 1988–1998. The study lays bare the foundations of archival texts as embodying particular agencies centered within defined historical personalities that continue to exist in the present, which propel and animate the formation, production, circulation, consumption, and deconstruction of discourses about contemporary Philippine art historiography,

its methodologies, frameworks, and its own construction and intertexted relations with other institutions and its embodying individuals within the Philippine artworld system.

The analytical methodology and theoretical model of the study is premised on the textuality of history: the manner in which history is constructed and construed based upon texts, and hence its construction is also prefigured according to the discursive nature of texts, which are never neutral or detached, but are always subject to intervention and human agency. Its significance is seen in lieu of the totalizing project of modern art history, which sublimates the social, political and agentical relations between works of art and its practitioners, surveyors, consumers, and impresarios. Rather than discuss and reify a canon of works of art based on an iconic grid of intelligibility, the study instead focuses on the social relations and productions between art practitioners within the unique space that is the communal art association, enabling that institution to animate and exist in order to fulfill the desires of its combined agents, in alliance with—or against—other institutional bodies in the Philippine artworld, such as the state funding system, the state gallery system, and the private gallery system. These intra-institutional and inter-institutional practices are based on the willingness of agents to engage in exchanges of symbolic and/or economic capital, with the aim to accumulate their respective individual or communal gains, at the expense of other agents.

The study operates on the presumption that all texts, especially that of historical texts, are foregrounded by subject-positioning by its authors and readers, that is, that the body and direction by which history is written and disseminated is mediated by the interests and subjectivities of its agents, which requires us to understand the theoretical foundations by which subject-positions are formulated and justified. The writer: Reuben Ramas Cañete, and the topic: Art Association of the Philippines, should never be taken in isolation from each other, but interlinked and necessarily problematized, for the author is not remote to the subject, but rather is a fully fledged agent of the same, being a member and, more crucially, former president of the said institution. Therefore, the author's intentions for tackling the subject as history are not to be taken in light of the former's supposed "disinterest" as a spectator, but rather as a fully-realized agent working for both the subject: AAP; and for the other institution, that of the author's surveyors, the members of the faculty of the Department of Art Studies of the University of the Philippines. The first institution acts as its re-embodied speaker, while the second acts as its (supposedly) disembodied surveyor. The resulting historical

text, therefore, speaks in discursive slants that reveal the positionality of its author attempting to fulfill both duties.

The study subsumes itself within the symbolic topography of the academic field by reifying the contemporary theoretical concern in art history of addressing the textual imbalance realized through the infusion of interdisciplinary studies with the sociological and anthropological fields. In realizing that, by finding a "cure" for the historiographic myopia that traditional (read: form-based) art history has been afflicted with, the study must necessarily graft the critical theories from such disciplines that logically applies in the understanding of its subject's "human" behavior across the matrix of artworld ideologies and practices. Such an art historical academic practice has been emergent for the past seventeen years within the Department, and has allowed for a greater understanding of art and its practice by citing the conditions and contexts under which it has been premised, produced, circulated, and consumed.[1] In the Department of Art Studies, faculty members who have advocated such theoretical interdisciplinary practices include Dr. Patrick D. Flores, in his seminal study of colonial Philippine art utilizing post-colonial discursive analytics; or Dr. Gerard Rey Lico's study of architecture and urban planning in Manila during the American colonial period as an extension of the twin goals of imperialism and modernity. The utilization of theories from Western sociology, such as Pierre Bourdieu's notions of field and habitus, cultural studies (the seminal contributions of Raymond Williams in the heterotroped space between cultural sociology and critical theory), and anthropology (which range from Michel Foucault's methodology of discourse analysis, to Alfred Gell's notion of agency and the homunculus, and Marcel Mauss' study of exchange relations), allows the study to explain the networked series of connections made between object, maker, viewer, and regulator. For the history of the AAP is not only a story of art objects set across chronological space, but also a history of an institution's production of signification within an activating communal continuum—a story of peoples acting out agentic roles within a self-defined artworld system that relies on the production of symbolic capital as its primary existential drive, within which such actions are prefigured to best suit their interests.

The study's production of discursive textual patterns is complicit in the notion that the analysis, inclusion, and elucidation of subject positionality must be set within this framework of intelligibility that includes, and excludes, an utterance within a generally realized condition, whose operating devices are constantly bared for the purpose of recognizing its preset limits of elucidation. This implies that, on one hand, the constituent elements by which the parameters

of discourse are operating within have pre-realized the territoriality of the field's articulation, bounded as they are within the definitional closure of Arthur Danto's term "artworld," and the rules of engagement by which each operating artworld institution, as constituted by its respective agents, adheres to by convention.[2] On the other, it also implicates that the said agents operating within this discursive field do so not merely on their ability to affiliate, and be hegemonized, by their respective institutions, but also allow, by their empowerment within such an institution, the production of their own agentic spaces, in the form of struggles, alliances, strategies of manipulation, isolation, coercion, and domination.

Such agentic spaces can be read into the contemporary history of the AAP between 1988 and 1998, based on its voluminous records and designated actions within agents of the institution, and between institutions, that form a massive and well-connected network of relations of power in the artworld, in contrast to the dearth of archival information in the same institution of the previous decades. The study also analyzes the synchronic patterns that are articulated by the multiple production of these discourse-positionalities: in the way that competing centers of power articulate their relations between dominants and peripherals or subalterns, the conditions of which are always in flux, and dependent upon the dominant's ability to play, and appease, its multifarious opponents. It is also beginning to be seen that the said "dominant" (the center of power within the AAP, its presidency and attached bureaucracy) is itself subjected to a peripheralized subjugation by more powerful entities in the Manila artworld, such as the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP); and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), among others, who wish to impose upon the AAP's body politic their own interests and agendas for dominance, but which is actively, and constantly, resisted by the latter. The efficacy of this resistance, or the capitulation of its lead agents due to the enticements of symbolic capital handed out by its institutional rivals, heralds the rise and fall of the institution's ability to function and propagate its own ideological agenda, and symbolic value vis-à-vis others.

This implies that the precursors of such discourse are, by their sheer role as instigators and/or propagators, also conspire to produce their textual existence and/or dominance through such powers of agency at their disposal. Thus, the study as a body of texts that the author instigates is itself an index of the parameters by which the author is allowing himself to be circumscribed in terms of the power relations between him and other still-existing and empowered entities of the artworld. What discourses that are allowed are set in relation to their viability as "allowable texts," given the contexts of their eventual dissemination and consumption

Herein now lies the matter by which the role of the study's writer must be considered in relation to the study subject. It has often been the contention before that the role of the art historian is that of the passive recorder of events, personalities, and objects. As we can already surmise, such a case can only be rationalized if: a) the relations between the encoder of historical text, and the constituent "encodees" each operate within a hermetic zone of imagined non-interference; b) the encoder-historian produces such texts within a condition of ideally imagined social, political, ideological, sexual, ethnic, racial, and economic disinterest; and/or c) that the encoder/historian's strategies of interest and agency dictate precisely those methods of textual construction that best utilize the manipulation of selective silence, with regard to the historical articulation of the encodee within the body of his/her own textual production, as related to the body of textual articulation of the encoder/historian. Hence, the formation of modern art historical text, the foundation upon which most historical discourse is based, debated, and disseminated, is in itself a site for the contestation between the agentic powers of the writer and the very real agencies of the written. It must therefore be included within the study arguments that the positionality of the study's "author" with the study's subject does not constitute a disinterested, objectified, ahistorical, and apersonal relation. Rather, it is precisely because of the active agency wielded by the writer (as affiliate of the AAP) in relation to the bodies of archival knowledge (of the AAP) that such discourses are bared, manipulated, and furthered, for the strategic ends of the writer, the institution/s he represents, and to whom he interpellates.

The positionality of the historian/author is therefore decisive: as the compiler and translator of texts, the author achieves historiographic legitimation of discursive frameworks by the act of engaging and privileging texts based upon his own interests and ideology. Hence, the author is never poised in a "neutral" or "objective" position. Indeed, it is the author himself/herself that causes the subject (art history, and for whom it serves) to be articulated and debated upon in the first place. The author, therefore, is an integral player in the fields of textual production, discursive ideology, and historiographic power. The only reason why, historically, authors have claimed neutrality of positions in historical texts is due to their own treatment of history as "objectified realities"[3] that are used to serve their own strategic interests as propagators of textual discourse. In the case of the study, the author not only acknowledges his "partiality," but also extends the concept of historian to its logical ends—as a self-conscious compiler, editor and speaker of disembodied but still potent texts.

This complicit relation between writer and text also implies that the subjects of contemporary historical texts are not sealed by the (imagined) totalitarian power of the writer, but are themselves capable, and willing, to further their own strategic interests through the manipulation and production of institutionally accepted and propagated—hence protocanonical—texts, which, once deployed, best serve their own programs and schemes of production, circulation, and consumption. Therefore, the forms of historiographic articulation are resultants of the pairing of congruent interests and intersections of powers between the writer and the subject, allowing a median space to be produced as a result of such agencies. It must be emphasized that this space does not serve to substitute the hermetic spaces of the traditional art historical discourse, but rather, refunctions the arenas of struggle, negotiation, and compromise that is enacted in this enterprise. The false neutrality that sometimes results in the production of texts is not a pseudo-neutrality based on a complicit agreement to objectify history, but rather as a result of the mutual cancellation of agentic forces in the resultant collision of such interests. This process is not absolute, nor does it result in a totalist negation of energy.

Indeed, it oftentimes results in the energization of alternative discourses, produced from within the fireballs of colliding agency/counter-agency functions, which expand the parameters of debate into another paradigmatic spatiotemporal scheme. It also results in the multiply empowered discursive thrust into spaces where the mutual interests of writer and subject conflate and conspire to dominate. Hence, the AAP as institution must still be reckoned with despite the attempt of the author to sublimate it for his own interests, for the narrowly defined institutional interests of the AAP are also potentially divergent to the interests of the author. Its counter-movements, such as activating another competing agent to pursue the same institutional goals of producing an institutionally accepted history should it reject the effort of its first author-as-agent, or its massified criticism of the said author in the social sphere of the artworld in order to reduce his credibility (and hence symbolic capital as a "fair and legitimate" historian) are to be expected and are potentially real. Hence, the author's actions, should he desire the continuation of such a close relationship with the subject, should not diverge to such a degree as to invite such an action. Therefore, the formation of contemporary history is at once potentially deconstructive and socially effective. This is at the core of the author's conviction of the relevance of writing contemporary history on such a (partial) subject, this razor-thin line between academic production and social reaction.[4]

Simultaneously, the role of the writer/historian/encoder of texts must be brought to closer scrutiny as a co-agent in the production of historical discourses. The polymorphic conditions of textual production is now made complex by the realization that the agentic powers of the writer are aimed for peculiar institutional ends and purposes, to wit, the production of goods within the academic market. This role is articulated in the needs and requirements of such a field, which imposes its own epistemic system, as encoded by the heuristic practices of the academy, in this case, the requirements for a study by the Department of Art Studies. The position of the writer, therefore, must necessarily be self-implicated in his reproduction of the academic discourse schemata, subject, as always, by his process of negotiating and manipulating the topography of intelligibility and intellectual canonization among the manifold theoretical territorializations in the field of academic power. The study, thus, serves as a test on the extent of the boundaries by which the Department defines the relevancy of art history by tackling the polyglot of voices in the present, as manipulated and orchestrated by the primary voice of the author, while nominally subsuming itself to the academic disciplinary system by which the Department of Art Studies polices the academic—and thus symbolic—credentials of its members.

Secondly, the study contends that authors of any historical text do not come from a neutral background, originating "way out there," and implying that the relationship between author and subject is set in a blind.[5] They are, primarily, co-actors of the plot in which the narrative is composed "on the fly" by the actors themselves, equally engaged as they are in the social and literary fields of production. This is primarily because of the nature by which historians—particularly art historians—aim to maximize the effect of their literature to their audiences. It is of relevant concern, therefore, that the study and its author redirect the gaze of art history from the text to its writer, for the former cannot proceed without the latter's initial premises of textual construction, existential textualization, and productive contextualization. It is only after the satisfaction of a keyed series of relations between authors and texts can we begin to trace the impact both produce upon a body of publics—that is, its consequent political configurations upon the practice and specified field of production, circulation, and consumption. The premise of this keyed relationship should thus be made glaringly clear at the outset. Hence the direct connection of subject (AAP) and author (former AAP officer) as mutually configured components in the study are manifested and, for the purposes of elucidating on the issues implied, necessarily problematized.

The study peruses the archival documents of the AAP in order to show the inner workings of institutional power-formation and management that the

AAP and its "animating" leadership practice within the given parameters of the Philippine (or at least Manila-based) artworld. These primary documents provide the enfleshing of the AAP as an iconic organism, with its own institutional interests, its constitution, its systems of legitimation and symbolic empowerment, as well as its own rationale for existence. This is then set against texts formed by counter-agents of the AAP, such as essays written by art critics, memos by arts administrators, manifestos by artists, and other utterances by artworld entities who engage the institutional discourse of the AAP, with the aim of defeating its agenda, or more accurately, in pursuing their own interests at the expense of the AAP's. In enfleshing the institutional discourse of the AAP, therefore, it is vital to disclose contents of the minutes of meetings, and memoranda written as a result of Board Meetings, or executive actions of the AAP leadership, for these provide the clearest form of agentic formation and identification of the AAP leadership as *AAP personified*. It is equally pertinent to unveil the documents pertaining to the various sub-institutions the AAP fosters, such as the publication *AAP Liham*, or the Annual Art Competition catalogues, as these form the foundations of the same institutional discourse that the AAP, as well as competing institutions and agents, identifies as its own. Allied with the investigation of power relations between entities within the AAP, as well as liaison relations between the AAP and other institutions, these serve as the primary forms of elucidation that the study explores both in the aim of eventual reproduction as meta-narratival text, as well as provide indices for the exploration of theoretical issues on agentic relations that the study investigates within the discipline of art history.

The study believes that the excavation and arrangement of such archival texts brings to the fore the often sublimated histories of difference and struggle that results when a totalist officializing historical discourse is produced, circulated, and emphasized, one which, as Ranajit Guha has reflected in his own excavatory practice of a critical postcolonial historiography, alludes to "the predication of another will, that of the insurgent" (Spivak 1987, 204-05).[6]

The premise of the study, moreover, brings to the fore the main point of the artificiality of the construction of art history based upon the complex realities of alternative discourses, contra-activating agencies and dominant-peripheral borderings, as much as it also attempts to deconstruct, critique, and foreground the institutional praxes of the AAP. The morphology of such a delimited art history, therefore, must not only acknowledge the boundaries by which its textual utterance is framed within, but also the very limits of intelligibility and familiality that are circumscribed by such an utterance. The study, therefore, contends that since

the production of art history is always multi-valenced and site-specific to its contexts of production, circulation and consumption, its own mapping of the terrain: contemporary art history should be epistemologically delimited to its strategy of outlining a *specific* narration about the AAP from 1987 to 1998. It therefore does not aim to construct a "complete" and/or "general" history of the AAP, but only infers to the outlines of this field by the configurations and effects of the AAP's institutional discourse. The study shall also categorically state its artificiality in the construction of such a meta-narrative as "a contemporary history of the AAP" and the denial of its centrality as an authentic monologue of absolute truths about the subject; its uniqueness as a singularly unproblematic account of a set of truly controversial events and personalities; or its potentiality as an absolute facture in the body of historical texts about the subject. The study states that its project to construct a history on the art institution is an attempt, tempered by the limitations of theory, practice, and orientation, at mapping the discourses of agency, power, epistemology, utterance, system, production, and display in the contemporary history of the Philippine artworld, of which the AAP and its agents are an integrally significant participant of.

All historiographical practices are, in one way or another, attempts at an archeology of knowledge. What the study refocuses upon is not only the methodology of the excavation, and the manner by which debris is classified into orders of epistemic legibility. It must also contextualize the relations between archeologist and archeological site as a matter of affective inference. What this study adds to the burden of mapping knowledges is the process by which anthropologists infer from their living subjects the cartography of their multiple existences, taking from a position in which the investigator is named by the analyzed community as one of its "chief speakers" (agentically speaking, as a former president, my utterance of this narration is overdetermined by this pointing signage of the transmigration of my person-hood to this former office—and my accrual of the symbolic power of the same, allowing me to speak of the subject and its agents in the position of meta-authority). That the difference between author and subject is inferentially familial (as practicing art writer and AAP member/officer) should be seen not only in light of the critique of the relations between authors speaking for its subjects, but also within the factor of author speaking *as its subject.* Person-hood, indeed, is traced through and webbed between an author and his subject. This is a theoretical and conceptual stance by which the author continues to critique the system of interdependencies and autonomies which perforce interpellators to remain invisible behind the screen of legitimated bodies of knowledge. ∞

ENDNOTES

Epigraph: Terry Smith, "Modes of Production," from Nelson and Shiff 1996, 255.

[1] The "inaugural text" by which this epistemic transformation of the Department was enacted is arguably Patrick Flores's 1990 essay "Cracking the Canon, Positioning the Other", published by *The Diliman Review.*

[2] In other words, the production of the spaces of what Pierre Bourdieu defines as habitus, that is, "the system of durable, transposable dispositions …principles, which generate and organize practices and representations that can be … adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends" (Bourdieu 1993, 4-7).

[3] Meaning the naturalization of factures and, more importantly, the formation of the canon of texts and objects that privilege a particular discursive framework adopted by the author.

[4] The author as art historian has been traditionally assumed to be poised "above the fray of subjective opinion-making" and "clearly focused on the big picture," that is, the historiographically corrected (therefore insulated) positionality of external viewer looking into internal events, teasing from within a slew of facts the grand narrative of history: progressive, demarcated, and conceptually unified (therefore silenced). This view was especially imposed upon the disciplines of anthropology and art history from its formative development in the middle-latter half of the 19th century until the advent of deconstruction and psychoanalysis in the 1960s. The necessity of its imposition can be viewed aggressively as a strategy to hermetically seal the boundaries of art historical discourse strictly to within what Donald Preziosi calls the "anamorphic archive," that is, to collapse the discipline of art history within a grid of orchestrated orders of visual intelligibility within a spatiotemporal grid, catered to the pedagogical requirements of the university art museum, then as now translatable as the canon of works (hence pointed subjects) whose significance requires their presence (and hence, the invisibility of the insignificant) in that hegemonic machine of visual pedagogy, the slide lantern projector. See Preziosi 1989, 72-79.

[6] A more complete description of Guha's commentary is reflected on *Art and Society* (25), the official textbook of the Department of Art Studies, as it applies in the academic struggle to break the stifling limits of canonical texts in art historiography and its interpretation.

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